

Searched by the Psalms Series at Brentwood

July 25, 2010

God's Favour

Psalm 85 & Luke 11:1-13
(Hymns 740, 694, 765, 777)

The *Good News Bible* from which we read each Sunday entitles this Psalm 'A Prayer for the Nation's Welfare'.

Robert Davidson calls it 'Living with Hope' in his commentary, *The Vitality of Worship*.

In the original Hebrew, the title refers to the Korahites, a group with a special role as Temple singers.

This Psalm, then, is a prayer for a nation that lives in hope sung in the midst of the people gathered in worship to remember their hope for a flourishing community that enjoys love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, and prosperity.

The social context in which the Psalm was written clearly does not reflect those qualities of life.

Commentators suggest that the writing and first singing of the Psalm in Jewish worship was at the time of exile or shortly after Israel's return from exile.

If during Israel's time of exile in Babylon, the hope is for a return to their land and a restoration of prosperity.

If soon after the return, the hope is for something greater, something better, than they have experienced.

It is almost a lament for their hopes not being met, mixed with a fervent prayer for guidance and strength to create the nation God desires as his witness of blessing to the world.

At first glance, these are dramatically different settings than ours in this neighbourhood of Metro Vancouver in 2010.

Faithfulness is no longer organized as it was in ancient Israel.

Our nation is no longer officially religious.

Our national social life no longer centres around worship.

We live in a secular society.

To come together on a Sunday morning to join with others in the worship of the God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a choice that fewer and fewer people are making.

But despite the differences between our social contexts, great as they are,
perhaps there are some commonalities worth noticing.

First, both communities gathered in worship are disappointed.
Things are not the way they or we would like them to be.
The world in which they and we are praying the Psalm
is not filled with love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, and prosperity.
Hatred, indifference, abuse, war, and poverty
seem to dominate too many communities.
Our social media are dominated by stories of negativity,
of what's wrong with the world.
It's hard to be resiliently positive in face of this barrage of bad news.
It's hard to see God's presence in the midst of these woes.
Indeed, I suspect many have turned from faith, including the Christian faith,
because of such disappointment.
Why should I worship a God who lets this kind of stuff happen?
Where is your God in the face of such destructive attitudes and behaviours?
These are tough and fair questions.
We'll come back to the answer suggested by this Psalm in a moment.

The second commonality is the fervent longing of the people gathered in worship
for a different future.

They and, I sincerely hope, we
have been grasped by the vision of God's reign that fills the Lord's Prayer.
It is the vision of a world that honours God's name and the power behind it,
that feeds the hungry,
that forgives those who do wrong,
that provides mutual support and help in times of testing.
It is the vision of world guided by love.
Grounded in that attitude,
seen most powerfully in the person of Jesus Christ,
our behaviours would express the blessings
of faithfulness, righteousness, and peace.
Were we to live in those ways,
prosperity would fill this land and this world.

That's the answer to those tough and fair questions
we mentioned a couple of minute ago.
Perhaps, just perhaps, the reason people have turned away from the church
is that they do not find the ideals of the faith practiced here any longer.
They do not find in the church a community of accepting love,
a community of forgiveness and restoration,
a community where people feed each other in every dimension of their beings
as the beloved friends of God we were created to be,
a community where they can get support and help in times of testing.

I have to say that I have experienced such a community
here at Brentwood.

We are more faithful in living this kind of faith
than many others churches I have known.
And we can grow in the faith to be this kind of community even better.

The key to that kind of growth
is to allow the spirit of this Psalm to be written in our souls
and to live our lives together out of this profound wisdom.

Three things strike me as crucial to the message of this Psalm.

First, it reminds us of the powerful presence of God's favour and forgiveness.

This is not something to be earned by the chosen few,
but the reality in which the whole world lives.

For Christians, that reality was finally established in the work of Jesus Christ.

God's dealt with his anger and rage
by taking it on himself in Jesus Christ
and restoring our relationship to him as his beloved children and friends.

Every person has the opportunity to be a blessing,
to live out the new covenant God made with the people of his world
to be blessings to each other and their natural home.

This is God's favour.

It is his to offer, not ours to control.

We are its servants, its ambassadors, its witnesses.

We invite all people to enjoy it.

Second, prosperity takes on a richer meaning in this Psalm.

True prosperity arises from faithfulness to the covenant,
righteousness in our actions and behaviours,
and peace and well-being in our communities.

The foundation for all of these qualities of life together is love.

People who dismiss love as too soft, too flaky, too weak,
just don't get it.

They live in fear,
often trapped in their own anger and rage.

To avoid that hell,
they project their negativity onto others
and make them the enemy to be defeated.

They sow hatred, defensiveness, conflict, and violence,
all in the name of strength and their own brand of prosperity.

Christians witness to a different way of flourishing,
a way grounded in the love seen in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Third, there is a confidence in this Psalm that God's power will prevail.

Love and faithfulness *will* meet.
Righteousness and peace *will* embrace.
God and humans *are* reconciled in Jesus Christ
and true prosperity is possible.

We still have to choose to cooperate in it.
But God's Spirit is constantly working in us and through us to make that happen,
to gently but firmly persuade us of the joy that comes
when we accept the embrace of God's love,
relax into that reality,
and live the love this world so desperately needs.

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